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C O N F I D E N T I A L LONDON 001876

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/11/2019
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [LE](#) [SY](#) [UK](#)
SUBJECT: FCO MINISTER IVAN LEWIS' "INTRODUCTORY" VISIT TO
SYRIA/LEBANON

Classified By: Acting Political Counselor Daniel McNicholas, reasons 1.
4 (b/d).

11. (C/NF) Summary. Recently appointed Foreign Office Minister Ivan Lewis made his first visit to Syria and Lebanon August 3-6, in what FCO officials told us was Lewis' "introductory" visit to the region. In Syria, Lewis sought to broaden the UK's bilateral relationship with Syria and urged Syria to take the opportunity to push forward on Middle East Peace Process (MEPP). He encouraged Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem to cooperate with the USG on security issues. Muallem indicated that the Syrian Government plans to increase cooperation with the USG through the end of the year, at which point it will be time for the USG to make positive movements. Muallem also said he did not see the EU-Syria Association Agreement as a bilateral issues with the UK, preferring to discuss it only in the context of EU discussions. In Lebanon, Lewis walked away with a "positive impression" of Lebanese efforts to form a government and urged officials to take the opportunity to support the USG's efforts on MEPP. Lewis hails from a primarily Jewish constituency and, according to officials, took this trip to learn more about the Syrian and Lebanese perspective on regional issues. End summary.

12. (C) Foreign Office Lebanon and Syria team leader Nishi Dholakia and desk officer Lizzie McKinnell told Poloff August 11 that recently appointed Foreign Office Minister Ivan Lewis' August 3-6 visit to Syria and Lebanon was an "introductory" trip. Dholakia said that Lewis, through his work with the Labour Friends of Israel group, felt as though he had a good understanding of Israel's perspective on regional issues and wanted to learn more about the Syrian and Lebanese approach.

Syria

13. (C) The centerpiece of Lewis' August 3-4 visit to Syria was his meeting with Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem and Deputy Foreign Minister Ammoura, where Lewis sought to continue discussions from Muallem's July 24 meeting with UK Foreign Secretary Miliband in London. Lewis urged Syria to "use its influence" to push the Middle East Peace Process (MEPP) forward, to do "everything in its power" to curb foreign fighters transiting Syria to Iraq, to increase security cooperation with the USG, to restrict the movement of arms, and to respect human rights. Dholakia said Lewis also delivered "tough messages" on Hamas and Hizbollah, noting that the UK does not support "unconditional engagement" but does want to improve its relationship with Syria. Muallem said that Syria intends to increase its cooperation with the USG through the end of the year, at which point it will be the USG's turn to start positive momentum. He also told Lewis that he did not see the EU-Syria Association Agreement as a bilateral issue, preferring to discuss it only in the context of EU talks. FCO Middle East Director John Jenkins, who was on the trip, said, according to Dholakia, that Muallem seemed "skeptical

and pessimistic" about Israeli movement on MEPP and indicated that more needed to be done to instill a positive outlook amongst Arab governments. Lewis also met with Syrian Minister for Religious Awqaf, with whom the UK works closely on the PREVENT strand of its counter-terrorism agenda.

Lebanon

¶4. (C) In Lebanon, Lewis offered the UK's support in the formation of a government, urged for the government to be effective in its operations, and called for UNSCR 1701 to be upheld. Accompanied by Jenkins, he held meetings with President Michel Sleiman, Speaker Nabih Berri, PM-designate Saad Hariri (by phone), caretaker PM Fouad Siniora, and Foreign Minister Fawzi Salloukh. Dholakia said Lewis walked away with a "positive impression" of Lebanese efforts to form a government and felt that Hariri took on board the need to reform government institutions. Lewis also made clear to Lebanese officials and in public statements that the UK Government had clearly indicated to Israeli officials that air incursions are a breach of UNSCR 1701, but that the Government of Lebanon needed to do more against arms smuggling. He also urged the Lebanese to take the opportunity to move forward on MEPP. Lewis commented to UK officials that he thought the Lebanese remain "skeptical" of what the Israelis will agree to.

Comment and Bio Info

¶5. (C/NF) Lewis represents Bury South, just outside of Manchester, which is a predominantly Jewish constituency. Unlike other MPs who play down their Jewish heritage, including David Miliband and Gillian Merron, for Lewis it is a large part of his identity. Prior to being elected to Parliament, he was Chief Executive of the Manchester Jewish Federation as well as Chief Executive of Jewish Social Services. He is a former Vice Chair of Labour Friends of Israel and currently a trustee of the Holocaust Education Trust.

¶6. (C/NF) After his appointment to the Foreign office in June 2009, there was whispering among the UK Jewish community that Lewis was moved to the FCO to counter balance the pro-Palestinian view point of Foreign Secretary David Miliband, and that the UK's Jewish community will seek to control Lewis' agenda. This "introductory" visit was likely an attempt to curb these rumors and increase his credibility amongst Arab interlocutors.

Additional Bio Info

¶7. (C/NF) In July 2008 Lewis publicly called on Prime Minister Gordon Brown to stop being so timid if he wanted to save his faltering premiership following Labour's surprise loss to the Scottish National Party (SNP) in the Glasgow East by-election, a traditionally safe seat for Labour. Surprisingly, Downing Street did not rebuke Lewis for his comments, but the media was quick to accuse No. 10 of getting its revenge when, a few months later, the tabloids reported that Lewis had been forced to apologize in 2007 to a female in his office who accused him of sexual harassment. Lewis reportedly remains a bit of a hound dog where women are concerned. He was married quite young - in his very early 20s - and has had marital troubles in the last few years. Contacts who know him well report he has manic depressive tendencies - "he's very up one minute, very down the next," and at least one FCO colleague has described Lewis as a "bully in the Bill Rammell tradition."

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